

Ewa Kusz

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4996-5781>

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Poland
Child Protection Center

“WHO ARE YOU, WHO AM I?” Does a psychologist need philosophy to better understand the sexual abuse of minors?

“I feel pain, physical suffering and crying, tears –
this is what happens when I ask myself: who are you,
who am I?” (Words of a survivor).

Abstract

This article attempts to look at the issue of sexual abuse from an anthropological point of view because the attempts by various scholarly disciplines to describe and analyze the phenomenon of sexual abuse, including attempts to identify causes and effects, do not provide clear answers to the question of the nature of what happens in sexual abuse. The first steps of the analysis show the need for a philosophical reflection, and point to the directions of such a reflection which can help to understand that the harm inflicted on a young victim by sexual abuse consists in a damage at the “core of the person,” of his own subjectivity, of his own “self.” It is an “anthropological harm or damage” resulting from “becoming an object” for the abuser. It interrupts the process of becoming an autonomous subject who understands himself and is able to enter in a dialogical relationship with others.

The gist of the damage of child sexual abuse remains hidden behind the tangible long-term effects. These effects are often insurmountable during the victim’s lifetime. It indi-

cates that we are dealing with damage to “who I am” – damage to the being of a sexually abused person. So, the person harmed in this way knows neither *who I am* – the person who experienced this harm, nor *who you are* – the perpetrator who harmed him and, in a sense, who the other is in general. Understanding the “anthropological harm” inflicted by sexual abuse clearly shows the challenge of the process of transitioning from the experience of “becoming an object” to discovering and rebuilding one’s own subjectivity, one’s own self, without denying the harm. Anthropological reflection concerns also the person of the perpetrator, who turned out to be the “bearer of evil.” Here, we have questions about intentionality, about responsibility for one’s actions, but also about the whole misery of a human being who, by objectifying another person, probably reduces himself to an object. Also, in the case of the perpetrator, understanding the process of becoming a perpetrator may help in the process of his resocialization, that is, the process of restoring his experience of his being as a free person open to meeting the other “you” who must not be harmed.

Keywords

Sexual abuse; sexual objectification; subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the problem of sexual abuse of minors has gradually become present in public consciousness. It was first picked up by scholars, and then the media, which began to uncover cases of abuse, especially in institutions.

Over the centuries, attitudes toward sexual contact between adults and minors have varied greatly and depended on cultural patterns that influenced educational methods and customs. In certain periods and cultural contexts, sexual contact with a minor was the norm.¹ Additionally, in the past, the age of socially acceptable sexual activity – mainly connected with getting married – was different from today’s accepted behaviors. It is worth noting that in general, the idea of children’s rights and the protection of children and adolescents from violence became an important topic thanks to the adoption of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 and the Convention on the Rights of the

¹ See R. Dorrzapf, *Eros, małżeństwo, Lucyfer w płudrach. Dzieje obyczajowości seksualnej*, Gdynia 1997; K. Imieliński (ed.), *Seksuologia społeczna*, Warszawa 1977.

Child 30 years later.² Regardless of these and other extremely important international acts,³ despite globalization and studies on the psychosexual development of children and adolescents, to this day there is no single approach to this topic.

What do we mean when we talk about sexual abuse? Generally speaking, it refers to activities of a sexual nature and with the characteristics of domination occurring in a certain social context between an adult or a peer and a child, over whom the adult or the peer has some kind of advantage. In the case of an adult, the advantage may be due to age, power held, function exercised, or a relationship of dependence. In the case of a peer, the advantage may be due to a difference in development or physical strength. What is important is that either way the advantage is used to satisfy a sexual or other need, such as power or dominance through sexual activities. These sexual activities between the perpetrator and the victim take place in some social context – family or institutional. This social context also participates in some form or degree in the abuse and may bear some responsibility for it.

The topic of sexual abuse can be considered from the perspective of different academic disciplines.

1. Sexual abuse is a crime. It is dealt with by the legal sciences and their associated disciplines such as criminology. They do so in terms of the qualification of the crime, liability, punishment, and the determination of damages and compensation to the victim.
2. Since sexual abuse is considered a crime in most legal systems, it is also dealt with in pedagogy in terms of prevention and rehabilitation of the perpetrator.
3. Sexual abuse in its causes and effects brings psychological and medical problems, therefore it is dealt with by psychological and medical sciences, mainly in the fields of psychiatry, pediatrics, neurology, and sexology. The aim of research in these fields is mainly to identify the reasons why an abuser sexually abuses. This includes examining for psychotic or neurological disorders and other existing mental problems that are factors conducive to sexual abuse. Another purpose

² The Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN in 1959 (A/RES/1386%20(XIV) – E – A/RES/1386%20(XIV) -Desktop (undocs.org) (9.01.2022), and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (A/RES/44/25 – E – A/RES/44/25 -Desktop (undocs.org)) 30 years later (9.01.2022).

³ Convention of the Council of Europe Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (9.01.2022).

of these branches of science is to determine the psychological and possibly medical effects on the victim caused by sexual abuse, and to identify risk factors in the victim that contributed to the sexual abuse of that particular person.

4. Neither the perpetrator nor the victim lives in a social vacuum. Therefore, risk factors should also be sought in the victim's family, and in the institution if sexual abuse occurred in a non-family, institutional setting. Social risk factors also need to be identified, such as circumstances that may be conducive to sexual abuse in the victim's culture, social group, or institution where he or she studies, undergoes treatment, or is active. This subject is dealt with in the social sciences.
5. Sexual abuse is also the subject of ethical analysis from the point of view of the norms or values that are violated by these acts.
6. The issue of abuse is also the subject of theology, and not just moral theology. This is of particular importance when the perpetrator and/or the victim are religious individuals, and the crime was committed by the leader of a religious group. Then the range of problems to be considered extends to the relationship of the perpetrator and the victim to God, to the relationship within the religious community, and to the question of the consequences of the abuse in the spiritual spheres of the individual and the community. Theological inquiries into the understanding of priestly office and ministry, authority in the Church, forgiveness and reconciliation, and intracommunity relationships, imply other important issues related to the image of God and the mission of the Church. These other issues that pose serious challenges to theology, are unfortunately still in the early stages of reflection.

Attempts by various scholarly disciplines to describe and analyze the phenomenon of sexual abuse, including attempts to identify causes and effects, do not provide clear answers to the question of the substance of what happens in sexual abuse. Rather, they prompt further questions and give rise to the need to seek some kind of holistic vision of what happens in the sexual exploitation of children and vulnerable people, in order to add something essential about human beings, about their being and becoming themselves, and about the meaning of sexuality in the light of the traumatic effects of sexual exploitation in childhood or adolescence. It is also necessary to answer the question about the presence of "witnesses" who, more or less consciously, were indifferent or, by downplaying the facts, allowed the evil and the crime against the positive and integral

development of the child to occur. Therefore, it seems reasonable to look at the problem of sexual abuse also from the perspective of philosophical anthropology. This is all the more advisable because the scientific disciplines that deal with the problem of sexual abuse, especially psychology and psychotherapeutic models based on it, assume a certain vision of mankind, one that portrays the perpetrator with non-integrated humanity and the victim with wounds that violate the integrity of his personal identity. This is the level of analysis to which we are led by the dual question asked by one of the victims and chosen as the motto of this article: Who are you, who am I? The answer to this question is important for the abused person's healing and also for the abuser's recovery work. It is important for everyone involved in the abuse drama, including those who witnessed it, to understand what happened and to prevent similar events in the future.

2. What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse of minors has been the subject of research and analysis for just over fifty years. This is especially true in the legal, psychological, and pedagogical disciplines, as well as in sociology. An important research problem has been the very definition of sexual abuse. In Polish studies on this subject, Professor M. Beisert⁴ and M. Czub⁵ have written about the topic most extensively. Both authors point to difficulties starting at the very basis of the notion of "sexual abuse." In English, the language in which the first works on this phenomenon were written, the following terms are used: sexual abuse, sexual maltreatment, sexual harassment, sexual violence, sexual assault, incest, and pedophilia.⁶ In English-language literature, the term sexual abuse is most commonly used. When a child is the object of sexual interest, the term "child sexual abuse" is used. However, the literature that deals with the study of perpetrators employs the terms "child molesting" and "pedophilia."⁷ In Polish, as well as in other languages, these notions are expressed in a number of ways. Thus, at the level

⁴ M. Beisert, *Kazirodztwo. Rodzice w roli sprawców*, Warszawa 2004; M. Beisert, *Pedofilia. Geneza i mechanizm zaburzenia*, Sopot 2012.

⁵ M. Czub, *Zrozumieć dziecko wykorzystane seksualnie*, Sopot 2015.

⁶ M. Beisert, *Pedofilia. Geneza i mechanizm zaburzenia*, Sopot 2012, pp. 19–47.

⁷ M. Beisert, *Kazirodztwo. Rodzice w roli sprawców*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 11–60.

of terminology, there is already a need to use precise terms to describe the phenomenon we are talking about.

In 2016, a manual entitled *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*,⁸ was created at the initiative of a global network of social organizations working to overcome child sexual abuse called End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes [ECPAT].⁹ The reason for publishing these guidelines was explained as follows: “Words matter because they affect how we conceptualize problems, prioritize issues, and forge responses. Inconsistent use of language and terms can lead to inconsistent laws and policy responses on the same issue. Despite the existence of legal definitions for a number of sexual crimes against children, there is still considerable confusion surrounding the use of different terminology related to the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.”¹⁰ To date, these guidelines have been translated into six languages. Therefore, they do not fulfill their original goal of global outreach. One may ask, therefore, whether an approach from the point of view of semantics solves the problem or whether it is necessary to address the problem at a more fundamental level namely, the philosophy of language.

As far as the definitions of sexual abuse are concerned, one can find many of them in the literature on the subject. M. Sajkowska writes about the lack of standards for defining child sexual abuse. She points out the difficulties involved in constructing an exhaustive definition: “[Difficulties] result from the differences in the definitional limits of the phenomenon depending on whether we analyze this phenomenon from the perspective of moral norms or legal norms, or, finally, if we take into account the experience of practitioners and colloquial connotations – often divergent and imprecise – of the term *child sexual abuse*.”¹¹

The following constitute a definitional problem:

- determining who is a child and a “helpless” person as a victim of sexual abuse;
- who can be defined as the perpetrator of sexual abuse;

⁸ Luxembourg Guidelines – ECPAT (9.01.2022).

⁹ ECPAT web site (9.01.2022).

¹⁰ Luxembourg Guidelines – ECPAT (9.01.2022).

¹¹ M. Sajkowska, *Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci Ustalenia terminologiczne, skala zjawiska, oblicza problemu społecznego*, pp. 6–10, in: *Dziecko Krzywdzone*, Vol 1 no. 1(2002), pp. 5–28.

- what act or behavior that takes place between the perpetrator and the victim can be defined as sexual abuse;
- what relationship exists between the victim and the perpetrator;
- and what is the perpetrator's motivation.¹²

Among the more commonly cited definitions of sexual abuse are those proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO), by the Standing Committee on Sexually Abused Children (SCSAC); those contained in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), in the US federal law; and the definitions formulated by David Finkelhor and Kathleen Faller.¹³ In order not to dwell too much on the definitional problem, only the most commonly used definition will be cited here, namely the WHO definition, which offers the following characterization of sexual abuse:

“Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in a sexual activity that he does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify the needs of the other person. This may include but is not limited to:

1. the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;
2. the exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;
3. the exploitative use of children in pornographic performance and materials.”¹⁴

The aspectual approach to the formulation of definitions indicates the need not only to operationalize the concept, as ECPAT attempts to do in its manual, but also shows the need for a descriptive method that will not so much define the phenomenon, as describe it. There is also the question of whether definitions formulated in this way actually exhaust the description of the event that

¹² M. Sajkowska, *Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci Ustalenia terminologiczne, skala zjawiska, oblicza problemu społecznego*, pp. 6–10, in: *Dziecko Krzywdzone*, Vol 1 no. 1(2002), pp. 5–28.

¹³ M. Sajkowska, *Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci Ustalenia terminologiczne, skala zjawiska, oblicza problemu społecznego*, pp. 6–10, in: *Dziecko Krzywdzone*, Vol 1 no. 1(2002), pp. 5–28.

¹⁴ *Guidelines for medico-legal care for victims of sexual violence*, WHO Geneva 2003 (9.01.2022), p. 75.

is sexual abuse, especially of minors. At a first intuitive glance, the legal, social, and medical sciences seem to fall short in this respect, which is even more true of the colloquial approach to the subject. Seeing this inadequacy – as a practicing therapist and a court-appointed expert witness relying on social, medical, and legal sciences – I place my expectations and intuitions in philosophers as regards directions of research.

3. First area of search – establishing notions

As mentioned earlier in this article, the basic definitional problem is to establish who the child is, who the perpetrator is and what his/her motivation is, and what the particular act of sexual abuse is. So, let us consider what kind of philosophical reflection might be helpful at this stage.

In the context of sexual abuse, the definition of a child who is “subject to absolute protection” relies primarily on legal criteria, which may vary from country to country. Polish criminal law defines such a child as a person under the age of fifteen. In ecclesiastical law and in many of the United States, a person under the age of eighteen is thus defined. Until recently, the age of sixteen was the limit of protection under canon law. In international law, there is a tendency to raise the age of absolute protection. An example of this is the above-mentioned Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse,¹⁵ which recommends that states signatories protect children up to the age of eighteen. There are strong reasons for favoring this lengthening of protection, as sexual exploitation is known to be highly harmful to the integral development of a young person. Also new in recent years, is the extension of absolute protection to the mentally disabled regardless of age. All these factors demonstrate some of the problems in defining precisely who is a victim of sexual abuse. There are additional elements that complicate the definition. Directly, the term refers to the person who has been harmed, but observation and research indicate that the range of “effect” of sexual abuse is not limited to the immediate victim. The people who are close to the victim and the community in which the crime took place – in other words, all those who have been affected by it, albeit indirectly – are also rightly

¹⁵ See Convention of the Council of Europe Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (9.01.2022).

considered victims. Although the distinctions made so far are very useful for organizing prevention or for administering justice, they do not bring us closer to understanding the gist of the problem of child sexual abuse. It remains hidden behind the tangible effects. Their long-term effects, often insurmountable during the victim's lifetime, indicate that we may be dealing with anthropological harm, with damage to "who I am" – damage to my being. We need to follow this line and reflect on who the *child* is as a *victim* of sexual abuse. It is necessary to put brackets¹⁶ around the otherwise valid legal terms, which are in any case based on the necessary pragmatic criteria that define the limit of absolute protection, which even limit the right to give consent to participate in sexual activities, so as not to disturb the person I am becoming. The **child** is already himself, but is also in the process of becoming what he has the capacity to be. The child is already a "whole person" but is not yet a "ready person". The harm of sexual abuse, which takes place between the "already" of being a whole person and the "not yet" of being a ready person, seems to interfere with this process of becoming in such a way that it makes it very difficult – if not impossible – to become and to be oneself in the sense of an integral development of personal potentialities.

What happens to a child when he is sexually abused? Language suggests that he becomes a **victim**, a person who has been wronged, abused. People who have been harmed in this way have a problem with being referred to as "victims." The term has negative overtones for them because it implies their helplessness, their sense of inability to overcome the harm, to do something about what was done to them. It is not a matter of erasing an event from one's history by forgetting or negating it, but of making it nonexistent, as it were, by annihilating it. In English, it is not only those who have been wronged who use the term "survivor," meaning someone who has survived, who is "saved." The term "victim" implies a certain static quality, while the term "survivor" implies dynamism – it indicates the possibility of continuing the process of "becoming," of doing something even something positive with what has happened to the individual. Stacy Snapp Killian, founder of Justus Love Corporation, who herself experienced sexual abuse, illustrates the difference between being a "victim" and a "survivor" as follows:

¹⁶ Based on the phenomenological approach.

Again and again, I find stories of people who say, “My sexual abuse was the most valuable part of my past. It doesn’t define who I am, but I use it to help other people.” (...) I designed www.justuslove.org hoping the “infotainment” it provides resonates with something inside those who feel they are still “victims.” (...) I went on to accept I was a “victim” and put in the hard-work and perseverance it takes to become a true “survivor.” It wasn’t easy and often I felt alone, but now, as fate would have it; twenty-two years later I created The Justus Love Corporation. I took the pain from my past and built the first and only multimedia company in the world for “survivors,” giving them a platform in which they can be the leaders they were born to be.¹⁷

So, what can be expected here from a philosophical reflection? An elaboration of who the child is as a person in the process of becoming, and how sexual abuse defines that child as a “victim” to the point where the child cannot become the person he has already begun to become since birth. These are the issues that can help one understand what I have referred to above as anthropological harm that results from sexual abuse by a perpetrator.

The *perpetrator* of sexual abuse of a minor is, by most definitions, someone who has an advantage over the child resulting in some kind of subordination or dependency. This advantage is based on age, a power relationship, kinship, custody, and/or social prominence. Thus, it is usually an adult who is either older or more mature than the victim. Most often, the perpetrator is defined as a person who actively acts to satisfy his needs by means of sexual activities. The nature of these needs is not specified, which makes this element of the term “perpetrator” vague.

Perpetrators are divided into those who come from within the family and those who come from outside the family. The essence of this division determines the type of bond that exists between the perpetrator and the victim. Some concepts extend the responsibility for child sexual abuse to those who, by failing to supervise and care for the child or failing to respond to threatening situations, have allowed the child to engage in sexual contact.¹⁸ This failure of responsibility includes, in particular, the parents and/or guardians of a child who, either directly or through negligence or a failure to heed alarming signals, have allowed a child to become sexually abused. It also applies to those

¹⁷ <https://justuslove.org/blog/2017/11/2/survivor> (9.01.2022).

¹⁸ M. Sajkowska, *Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci Ustalenia terminologiczne, skala zjawiska, oblicza problemu społecznego*, p. 9, w: *Dziecko Krzywdzone*, Vol 1 nr 1(2002), pp. 5–28.

who failed to intervene when they became aware of the abuse. As with the notion of a *child* or a *victim*, the identification of the perpetrator additionally requires more fundamental consideration than that which underlies the very useful definitions formulated for determining the perpetrator's liability, his or her rehabilitation, and various elements of prevention related to his or her motivations, addictions, and conduct.

It seems that in analyzing the offender's actions, it would also be appropriate to undertake a more fundamental anthropological reflection in search of answers to several questions. How was it possible for someone to become a perpetrator of sexual abuse? After all, no one is born as a predestined perpetrator of sexual abuse. So, what process has occurred not only in the area of individual psychological development or social relationships, but also in the individual's understanding and experiencing of his being? This observation applies both to offenders who were diagnosed with a sexual preference disorder in the form of pedophilia and to those who are "situational perpetrators." In essence, it is a question about the phenomenon of evil, about its intentionality and power of destruction, about the status of the other in a relationship in which "the other person turns out to be the bearer of evil," from whom the child is not able to flee, nor to develop in his proximity.¹⁹

In the definitions, *child sexual abuse* and what harm is caused on the person by the act of abuse by the behavior of the perpetrator, refers mainly to legal norms and/or moral norms of a given social environment. M. Sajkowska notes that "the reference to legal and customary norms opens up the possibility of relativism in the assessment of sexual contacts of the child and the exclusion from the area of sexual abuse of those behaviors which are permitted by custom, and not prohibited by law."²⁰ The existing literature on the subject rightly distinguishes many acts bearing the features of sexual abuse and divides them into acts with or without physical contact. These distinctions help to criminalize the acts. It can be said that the subject of a relationship between a child and an adult, which becomes sexual abuse, is worth considering at least in the light of the phenomenological approach and the philosophy of dialogue following, for example, the path indicated by Józef Tischner or other scholars in order to better understand both the harm and the consequences to the child, so that all

¹⁹ See J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu*, Kraków 2012, pp. 184–190.

²⁰ M. Sajkowska, *Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci Ustalenia terminologiczne, skala zjawiska, oblicza problemu społecznego*, p. 10, in: *Dziecko Krzywdzone*, Vol. 1 no. 1(2002), pp. 5–28.

witnesses and participants of this tragedy understand and accept responsibility for preventing and repairing the harm done.

In conclusion, the problems of definition in legal, social, and medical sciences related to the phenomenon of sexual abuse, show that it is necessary to look at it also from the perspective of philosophy as well as theology.

4. Attempts to describe the phenomenon of sexual abuse phenomenologically

A very interesting phenomenological analysis of the event of sexual abuse has been conducted by Susan J. Brison in her articles,²¹ and especially in her book.²² As an adult woman, Brison, a philosopher by education, was assaulted and experienced sexual violence during her stay in the South of France. First in her articles and then in her book, she describes her experience of trauma, its short and long-term effects, and her healing process in phenomenological terms. She does not dress it up in some philosophical or psychological concept, but deals with the event using her philosophical knowledge. However, it is worth noting that Brison experienced sexual violence as an adult, and that she was prepared by her education to undertake metareflection on the harm done to her. Such skills are lacking in children who experience such harm. Their metareflection – if it occurs at all – is done from an adult’s perspective.

An interesting description, not so methodologically structured as that of Brison’s, can be found in the work of Rachel Thompson,²³ who was a victim of sexual abuse as a child. She expresses herself in the form of essays, poetry, and prose. In this way, she takes the reader through the harm she experienced, the suicide attempts that resulted from the experience, and the healing process [with

²¹ S. Brison, *Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity*, in: Diana T. Meyers, ed. *Feminists Rethink the Self (Feminist Theory and Politics Series)* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996. S. Brison, *Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self*, in: Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 39–54. S. Brison, *The Uses of Narrative in the Aftermath of Violence*, in: Claudia Card, ed. *Essays in Feminist Ethics and Politics*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), pp. 200–225.

²² S. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2002. This book was translated into German and French.

²³ R. Thompson, *Broken Places*, Seattle 2012; R. Thompson, *Broken Pieces*, e-book 2016.

its] experience of love. Thompson's writings, like Brison's, offer a first-person narrative. The testimonies of those harmed are similar in nature.

The experiences of both the perpetrator and the victim harmed by another perpetrator, as well as the unusual relationship between them, can be traced in *Conversations with a Pedophile*,²⁴ a book by Amy Zabin. Zabin – herself a victim of child sexual abuse – was, for years, a music therapist in a penal institution. Her book is a description of her long-term therapy with a pedophile who slowly opened up to her, describing his life story and the dynamics of child abuse. Another book written by the sociologist D. W. Pryor²⁵ consists of thirty interviews he conducted with sex offenders, who were sentenced and were serving their terms.

An attempt to establish the responsibility of the perpetrator of sexual abuse by means of phenomenological analysis was made by Stephane Joulain in his doctoral dissertation.²⁶ Relying on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, the author, on the base of perpetrators' own stories, analyzes the motivation, intentionality, and cognitive distortions used by the perpetrator in an event of sexual abuse.

The work of the German Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse,²⁷ established in 2016, may also be an interesting lead in the search for a method to philosophically confront the effects of sexual abuse. The commission of inquiry bases its work on the broad concept of "Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit," introduced in 1959 by the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno in his essay "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit"²⁸ in connection with the excuses used in Germany to avoid facing responsibility for the Holocaust. The chairwoman of this committee, Prof. S. Andresen, in her introduction to the report of the commission of inquiry,²⁹ referring to T. W. Adorno, believes that working

²⁴ A. Zabin, *Conversations with a Pedophile*, Fort Lee 2003.

²⁵ D. Pryor, *Pedofilia 30 wywiadów z pedofilami*, Sopot 2014.

²⁶ S. Joulain, *Vers un traitement plus holistique des personnes ayant abusé sexuellement de mineurs: Analyse herméneutique et qualitative de la dimension religieuse et spirituelle de distorsions cognitives liées à l'abus et de leur prise en compte dans la psychothérapie*, Ottawa 2016.

²⁷ Unabhängige Kommission zur Aufarbeitung sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs <https://www.aufarbeitungskommission.de/> (9.01.2022).

²⁸ <http://aawe.blogspot.de/images/Theodor20W20Adorno20Was20heisst.pdf> (9.01.2022). English translation of the title: *What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?*

²⁹ U. Andresen, Programmatik und Wirken pädosexueller Netzwerke am Beispiel Berlins – Einführung der Unabhängigen Kommission zur Aufarbeitung sexuellen Kindesmissbrauch,

through the violence that took place is linked to critical questions not only about “identifying the structural and ideological conditions of violence, its cover-up or legitimization,” but also to questions “about responsibility here and now, about the influence of cultural and political actors, about the influence of public and scientific discourses. For this reason, working through sexual violence against children and adolescents, identifying structural and institutional failures in child protection, or diagnosing time- and environment-specific indifference to the suffering of those affected, are grounded in the current controversies.”³⁰

The practice of working through sexual violence directed against minors in communities and institutions adopted by the German commission of inquiry, is also an important contribution to understanding and overcoming entrenched mechanisms of abuse on the grounds of social, or political philosophy.

5. [Sexual] objectification³¹

In addition to the above-mentioned literature, there are some articles written from the position of feminist philosophy. These are mainly analyses of objectification, including sexual objectification, which – in my opinion – is one of the important elements of anthropological harm caused by sexual abuse.

The first person to explicitly refer to “sexual objectification” in the realm of philosophy was Immanuel Kant. He uses the term when a person is treated not as existing in himself (*in se*), but as a means to achieve the sexual satisfaction of another. A particular place of risk when it comes to sexual objectification, according to Kant, may be marriage, in which one of the persons, most often the woman, is treated as a tool for satisfying the other’s “sexual appetite.” The person

pp. 6, in: I. Hax, S. Reiß: *Programmatik und Wirken pädosexueller Netzwerke in Berlin – eine Recherche*. Berlin 2021.

³⁰ U. Andresen, *Programmatik und Wirken pädosexueller Netzwerke am Beispiel Berlins – Einführung der Unabhängigen Kommission zur Aufarbeitung sexuellen Kindesmissbrauch*, pp. 6, in: I. Hax, S. Reiß: *Programmatik und Wirken pädosexueller Netzwerke in Berlin – eine Recherche*, Berlin 2021.

³¹ Study based on: E. Papadaki, *Sexual Objectification: From Kant to Contemporary Feminism*, “Contemporary Political Theory” 6 (3) (2007), pp. 330–348; E. Papadaki, *Understanding Objectification: Is There Special Wrongness Involved in Treating Human Beings Instrumentally?*, “Prolegomena” 11 (1) (2012), pp. 5–24; E. Papadaki, *Feminists Perspectives of Objectification*, in: *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2019, and K. Stock, *Sexual objectification*, in: *Sussex Research Online*, 2015.

used as a tool to satisfy another person's sexual drive is treated by the abuser as an object, i.e., without regard for his autonomy. The abused person is not accepted in his human dignity, which makes sexual objectification, by definition, a negation and degradation of humanity.

The concept of sexual objectification was developed, both in philosophy and psychology, in the 20th and 21st centuries, especially in feminist thought. Two authors, Andrea Dworkin³² and Catharine MacKinnon,³³ have addressed this issue in relation to the proliferation of pornography, which they argue should be banned because it violates women's human and civil rights, and is an act of sexual objectification. These authors understand the act of objectification in a different way than Kant did. According to Dworkin and MacKinnon, objectification does not only affect the moral sphere of human beings, but also the social sphere. They believe that sexual objectification is not only the reduction of the other to a sexual object, but also the justification of his subjection on a social level.

Another author dealing with the subject of sexual objectification is the American feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky,³⁴ for whom objectification is a process in which a person treats neither oneself nor the other as a unity, but separates the sexual parts of the body and its sexual functions from the rest of the person and uses them only for sexual acts not experienced in the unity of the whole person, but only on a fragmented level of one's and the other's genital spheres. Thus, the process of objectification begins by breaking up the inner unity of a person, and by treating one of his parts (in this case, the sexual sphere) as an object. That person then treats himself and others as objects.

A very well-known author on the subject of objectification, including sexual objectification, is the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum,³⁵ whose studies on this subject are also used in psychology. According to Nussbaum, objectification occurs on seven levels, and involves the treatment of the other as:

³² A. Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. London 1981; *Woman Hating*, New York 1974.

³³ C. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, Harvard 1987; *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard 1989.

³⁴ S. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination. Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, New York 1990.

³⁵ M. Nussbaum, *Objectification* pp. 249–291, "Philosophy & Public Affairs" Vol. 24, No. 4, (1995).

1. a tool to achieve one's own ends (instrumentalization);
2. a human being who is deprived of autonomy and capacity for self-determination (denial of autonomy);
3. a human being who is deprived of the ability to act (inertia);
4. being interchangeable with other objects of the same type or with other substitute objects;
5. deprived of his/her boundaries and integrity, i.e., as someone who can be shattered (vulnerability to violence);
6. property that can be bought (ownership);
7. devoid of one's own feelings and experience (negation of subjectivity).

Nussbaum, drawing on Kant's thought, considers the problem of sexual objectification in moral terms as instrumentalization which, as with Kant, is the negation of humanity. Instrumentalization is not a problem for Nussbaum if it is a temporal act and does not necessarily harm the other person. According to Nussbaum, wrongful instrumentalization occurs when the other person is being treated exclusively and permanently as an instrument. Nussbaum's contribution to the understanding of sexual objectification is considerable, as she points out the consequences of sexual objectification for the subject.

Nussbaum's thought was developed by the Indian-born Rae Langton,³⁶ who now works in the United States. She looks into the concept of "treatment" that Nussbaum uses when she lists the seven levels on which objectification occurs and gives it a broad meaning. Langton is concerned with both attitude and action, i.e., how a person thinks and/or feels about another person. She supplements Nussbaum's seven levels of objectification with three more, namely:

1. *being reduced to one's body*: a person in the act of objectification is reduced to the part that is his body;
2. *being reduced to an aspect*: a person is treated primarily in some aspect, not as an integral and whole person;
3. *being ignored/denied speech*: a person is treated as mute, silent, unable to speak. It is a method of negating his humanity.

The Greek philosopher Evangelia Papadaki³⁷ distinguishes between intentional objectification and non-intentional objectification. Intentional

³⁶ R. Langton, *Sexual solipsism: Philosophical essays on pornography and objectification*, Oxford 2009.

³⁷ E. Papadaki, *Sexual Objectification: From Kant to Contemporary Feminism*, "Contemporary Political Theory" (2007) 6 (3), pp. 330–348.

objectification occurs when the one who objectifies not only has the intention to objectify, that is to negate humanity, but does so in a firm and constant manner. Non-intentional objectification is when someone performs objectification even though they have no fixed intention to negate someone else's humanity.

The aforementioned women scholars and philosophers have contributed many interesting thoughts to the subject of objectification that can be used when reflecting on sexual abuse, which is also a type of objectification of the victim by the perpetrator. It is necessary to relate objectification issues to the process of becoming a person, as indicated above. In this context, an anthropological or phenomenological analysis should consider the following elements:

1. the context in which objectification happens;
2. the manner in which objectification is accomplished;
3. the goal that is intended and achieved by the act of objectification.

6. The problem of sexual abuse as an anthropological problem

Psychology describes the multiple effects of sexual abuse and explains them according to its assumptions and methodology. Among the effects of a traumatic experience, the ones that stand out are those that indicate a deep disruption in the process of separation-individuation. That is why purely psychological categories seem to be insufficient for the analysis of this phenomenon, and methods and categories developed by phenomenology, philosophy of encounter, philosophy of values or philosophy of existence, turn out to be useful for its understanding. The literature on the subject shows that sexual abuse with the most serious consequences for the process of development of personal consciousness, is committed against minors who, for family or other reasons including religious reasons, were in a relationship of trust with the perpetrator of the crime. The closer the bond of trust between victims and perpetrators, the more disrupted the process of becoming and being oneself, which manifests itself in a purely functional understanding of oneself through identification with, for example, one's professional role and tasks to be performed. Personal identity understood as "self"³⁸ is merely functional. Such a person experiences himself and describes himself through the role he plays in society or the task he has to fulfill. These

³⁸ T. Grzegorek, *Tożsamość a poczucie tożsamości. Próba uporządkowania problematyki*, pp. 56nn, in: A. Gałdowa (ed.), *Tożsamość człowieka*, Krakow 2000, pp. 53–70.

give him value and meaning to his existence. It is difficult for him to discover himself as a person per se. Such effects are most often observed in an intrafamily situation where the perpetrator of the sexual abuse is one of the parents, a legal guardian, a sibling, or another close relative. The essential element of this event is that the person who was “close” by virtue of an existing relationship has become the abuser. Thus, the bond, often primary, between a child and an adult has been disrupted. Similar effects of abuse of a minor can be observed in situations outside the family, when the perpetrator is someone who has frequent and systematic contact with the child, such as a teacher, priest, child/youth group leader, coach, choir leader, and others. Also, in the case of these relationships, the bond that was previously there becomes a vehicle for wrongdoing and harm. The relationship itself is shattered, destroyed, and the result of this shattering is a disruption or even a halt of the process of becoming oneself.

Therefore, in analyzing an act of sexual abuse, it is important to pay attention to the following elements:

1. What happens to the child before, during and after the event of sexual abuse at different stages of development indicates, on the one hand, the fundamental importance of the bond between the child and the adult for becoming and being oneself. On the other hand, the often-insurmountable consequences of sexual abuse indicate that we are dealing with a special kind of harm, which can be described as “anthropological harm”, since it affects who the child “is” and who the child “becomes” as an abused person, but also who the abuser is and who the abused person becomes. Therefore, the meaning of the relationship with the abuser must also be analyzed using the philosophical categories and methods of phenomenology and of the philosophy of encounter. It is not just a static analysis of the evil that has taken place between the victim and the perpetrator, but it is an evil that has taken place in the encounter.³⁹ It can also be assumed that the process of rebuilding one’s subjectivity will also take place in the encounter with another person, who is the Other, but in a non- threatening way.
2. Therefore, in the context of relational dynamics, it is also necessary to consider dynamically who the perpetrator is and who the victim is in their personal dimensions, since “being a perpetrator” or “being

³⁹ J. Tischner writes about the distinction between a phenomenological analysis of evil and the experience of evil in a personal encounter in: *Filozofia dramatu*, p. 170nn., Krakow 2012.

a victim” is not necessarily a permanent state since no one is born either a perpetrator or a victim. “Something” happens that makes a person perform an act that makes them a perpetrator of sexual abuse. The question arises whether the experience of becoming a victim and a perpetrator can be described only in medical or psychological sciences, or whether a descriptive method can be used here to point out the anthropological problem and answer the question recurring in this article and formulated by the person harmed: *who are you, who am I?* But also – how did it happen that you became a perpetrator, and I became a victim?

3. The sexual abuse of minors is an act of objectification of the “self” – the person – of reduction to a thing. The act itself is episodic or lasts for a period of time, while the act of objectification happens over time. The act of objectification affects all the participants of this tragedy: the victim, the perpetrator, and witnesses. Sexual abuse does not only affect the body and the psychological sphere but also the “core of the person” itself. (E. Stein). Where the victim is a minor who experiences objectification in the act of sexual abuse at a time when his personality and sense of self as a person, or “I,” is just developing, becoming (him) self at the level of essence is blocked. Because of this block through no fault of his own, his life will most likely be lived “as if looking from the outside,” that he will not live as an “I,” as an autonomous subject. This is why the consequences of sexual abuse of minors are so tragic.

The act in which the perpetrator sexually exploits the minor also indicates that the perpetrator is experiencing himself as a thing; at least in the act of exploitation, he will be functioning on the surface of his life rather than in its depth. However, the act of sexual abuse itself does not necessarily mean that the perpetrator is living outside himself permanently.

4. The sexual event is not the end of either what happens between the perpetrator and the victim, nor does it exhaust the description of who the perpetrator and the victim are. Psychologically, it could be continued in therapy and by “working through” the harm suffered, making the person experience himself as a “victim” and then enter into the process of becoming a “survivor” and a “thriver.”⁴⁰ Thus, he or she not

⁴⁰ Whitfield uses the word “recovery” to refer to this healing process, based on her experience of accompanying her friend who was sexually abused by her father. This concept is especially

only “is” a person who has been wronged, but “becomes” a person who heals and helps to heal. In the above-mentioned literature, written in the first-person, this is very strongly emphasized. M. Briston writes, among other things: “What do I now make of the comment made by the facilitator of my rape survivors’ support group: ‘You’ll never be the same... , but you can be better’? I guess I still have to agree with it. Not ‘better’ in the sense of having a life that’s more coherent, in control, predictable. But ‘better’ in the sense that comes from acknowledging that life is a story in the telling, in the retelling, and that one can have some control over that. Recovery no longer seems to consist of picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It’s facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) there to begin with. No wonder I can’t seem to manage to put myself together again. I’d have to put myself, as the old gag goes, ‘together again for the first time.’ (...) I can’t tell my son the story of my assault in the way I’d like, pretending it didn’t really happen, or that it had a redemptive, happy ending. But my telling doesn’t have to break him. It’s not a tragedy. The story doesn’t have an ending. The truth is, I’m not lucky or unlucky. I’m just alive. Breathing in and out. ‘Tragedy,’ Wittgenstein wrote, ‘is when the tree, instead of bending, breaks.’ What I wish most for my son is not the superhuman ability to avoid life-threatening disasters, but, rather, resilience, the capacity to carry on, alive in the present, unbound by dread or regret. Not the hard, flinty brittleness of rock, but the supple tenacity of the wind rocked bough that bends, the bursting desire of a new mown field that can’t wait to grow back, the will to say, whatever comes, Let’s see what happens next.”⁴¹

Sometimes the victim remains in one place and assumes the posture of a “victim” for the rest of his life, or he may go from being a “victim” to becoming a “perpetrator.” Therapeutic experience shows that, in addition to a professional therapeutic setting, the process of “recovery” also takes place in a close encounter with a person, whose attitude says, “I accept you,” I treat you as a subject. Therapy or the rehabilitation process

popular in English-speaking countries when it comes to the therapeutic process undergone by sexually abused people. It has been described in: Whitfield, *Victim to Survivor, then Thriver: Carole’s Story – Hope for Survivors of Childhood Trauma, Abuse or Neglect*, Pennington 2011, among others.

⁴¹ S. Briston, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2002, pp. 115–118.

also applies to persons who have become perpetrators. Moreover, the perpetrator may continue to be a perpetrator, or may want to change – to become a person again, for whom the relationship with the other is a dialogical one and not an objectifying one. This aspect is worth considering from the point of view of anthropology.

From the legal point of view, the determination of guilt and possibly punishment, when it comes to perpetrators, and the restoration of justice or redress, when it comes to victims, represents a continuation of the event of “sexual abuse.” Redress and restoration of justice by perpetrators, but also by a society which has often passively looked on when harm was being inflicted.

7. Summary

This article attempts to look at the issue of sexual abuse from an anthropological point of view. Its author wants to indicate the lack of philosophical reflection and to point to the directions in which a deeper analysis of this problem – also by philosophers – could go in order to show that an “event” such as sexual abuse is an “anthropological harm/damage” inflicted on the victim; it destroys his experience of his own subjectivity, his own “self.” The person harmed ceases to know who he is, but also ceases to know who his abuser is and, in a sense, who the other is in general. So, he knows neither *who you are* – the perpetrator who harmed him, nor *who I am* – the person who experienced this harm. Understanding what has happened at the “core of the person” through an event like sexual abuse can also help the person to recover by rebuilding himself through the process of transitioning from the experience of “becoming an object” to discovering and rebuilding one’s own subjectivity, one’s own self, which does not deny the harm, but becomes stronger through his experience. And just as harm – as evil – took place in the encounter, so the process of recovery, the process of a kind of restoration also takes place in dialogue.⁴²

Anthropological analysis should also concern the person of the perpetrator, who turned out to be the “bearer of evil.” Here, we have questions about intentionality, about responsibility for one’s actions, but also about the whole tragedy of a person who, by objectifying another person, probably treats himself

⁴² S. Babu, *From Restoration of the Self to the Recovery of Human Mystery*, Bangalore 2014, pp. 395nn.

as an object. Moreover, in the case of the perpetrator, understanding the process of becoming a perpetrator may help in the process of his resocialization, that is, the process of restoring his experience of his being as a free person open to meeting the other “you” who must not be harmed.

Bibliography

- Adorno Th. W., *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* DOI: Theodor20W20A-dorno20Was20heisst.pdf (blogsport.de) (09.01.2022).
- Andresen A., *Programmatik und Wirken pädosexueller Netzwerke am Beispiel Berlins – Einführung der Unabhängigen Kommission zur Aufarbeitung sexuellen Kindesmissbrauch*, pp. 6, in: I. Hax, S. Reiß: *Programmatik und Wirken pädosexueller Netzwerke in Berlin – eine Recherche*, Berlin 2021.
- Babu S., *From Restoration of the self to the recovery of Human Mystery*, Bangalore 2014.
- Baran B., *Filozofia dialogu*, Krakow 1991.
- Bartky S., *Femininity and Domination. Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, New York 1990.
- Beisert M., *Kazirodztwo. Rodzice w roli sprawców*, Warszawa 2004.
- Beisert M., *Pedofilia. Geneza i mechanizm zaburzenia*, Sopot 2012.
- Bove L., *Giulia e il lupo. Storia di un abuso sessuale nella Chiesa*, Milano 2016.
- Brison S., *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2002.
- Brison S., *Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity* in: ed. Diana T. Meyers, *Feminists Rethink the Self (Feminist Theory and Politics Series)* Boulder, CO, 1996.
- Brison S., *The Uses of Narrative in the Aftermath of Violence*, in: ed. Claudia Card, *Essays in Feminist Ethics and Politics*, Lawrence 1999, pp. 200–225.
- Brison S., *Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self*, in: eds. Bal M., Crewe J., and Spitzer L., *Acts of Memory*, Hanover 1999, pp. 39–54.
- Council of Europe Convention, *Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, Strasbourg 2012. DOI: 1680794e97 (coe.int) (09.01.2022).
- Convention of the Rights of the Child DOI: A/RES/44/25 – E – A/RES/44/25 -Desktop (undocs.org) (09.01.2022).
- Cooper-White P., *Denial, Victims, and Survivors: Post-Traumatic Identity Formation and Monuments in Heaven*, “The Journal of Pastoral Theology” 22(1), (2012), pp. 2-1-2-16.
- Czub M., *Zrozumieć dziecko wykorzystane seksualnie*, Sopot 2015.
- Declaration of the Rights of the Child DOI: A/RES/1386%20(XIV) – E – A/RES/1386%20(XIV) -Desktop (undocs.org) (09.01.2022).
- Dorrzapf R., *Eros, małżeństwo, Lucyfer w pludrach. Dzieje obyczajowości seksualnej*, Gdynia 1997.

- Dworkin A., *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London 1981.
- Dworkin A., *Woman Hating*, New York 1974.
- Fiasse G., *Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of the Self: On the In-between of the Involuntary and the Voluntary, and Narrative Identity*, "Philosophy Today" Vol 58, (2014) Iss. 1, pp. 39–51.
- Gielarowski A., Grzywacz R., *Międzyprzedmiotowością a podmiotowością: intencjonalność w fenomenologii francuskiej*, Kraków 2011.
- Grzegorek T., *Tożsamość a poczucie tożsamości. Próba uporządkowania problematyki*, pp. 56nn, in: ed. A. Gałdowa: *Tożsamość człowieka*, Kraków 2000, pp. 53–70.
- Guidelines for medico-legal care for victims of sexual violence*, Geneva 2003.
- Holroyd J., *Sexual Objectification: the unlikely alliance of feminism and Kant*, DOI: Wayback Machine (archive.org) (09.01.2022).
- Imieliński K. (ed): *Seksuologia społeczna*, Warszawa 1977.
- Kalsched D., *Early Trauma and the Transpersonal: Evolving Stages in Suffering the Ego-Self Relationship*, "Union Seminary Quarterly Review" Vol. 51, Nos. 3–4, (1998), pp. 63–90.
- MacKinnon C., *Feminism Unmodified*, Harvard 1987.
- MacKinnon C., *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard 1989.
- Langton R., *Sexual solipsism: philosophical essays on pornography and objectification*. Oxford 2009.
- Nussbaum M., *Objectification* pp. 249–291, "Philosophy & Public Affairs" Vol. 24, No. 4, (1995). DOI: Objectification (uoc.gr) (09.01.2022).
- Papadaki E., *Sexual Objectification: From Kant to Contemporary Feminism*, "Contemporary Political Theory" 6 (3), pp. 330–348 (2007).
- Papadaki E., *Feminists Perspectives of Objectification*, in: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019. DOI: Feminist Perspectives on Objectification (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) (09.01.2022).
- Papadaki E., *Understanding Objectification: Is There Special Wrongness Involved in Treating Human Beings Instrumentally?*, "Prolegomena" 11 (1) (2012): 5–24 DOI: Prolegomena 2012-1. – 4. korektura.pdf (srce.hr) (09.01.2022).
- Pryor D. W., *Pedofilia. 30 wywiadów z pedofilami*, Sopot 2014.
- Sajkowska M., *Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci Ustalenia terminologiczne, skala zjawiska, oblicza problemu społecznego*, "Dziecko Krzywdzone" Vol 1 nr 1(2002), pp. 5–28.
- Snapp-Killian S., *The difference between a victim a survivor!* DOI: The difference between a victim and a survivor! – justus (justuslove.org) (09.01.2022).
- Stock K.,: *Sexual objectification*, in: *Sussex Research Online*, 2015. DOI: Sexual_objec-tification_AnalysisStock.pdf (sussex.ac.uk) (09.01.2022).
- Thompson R., *Broken Pieces*, e-book, 2016.
- Thompson R., *Broken Places*, Seattle 2012.
- Tischner J., *Filozofia dramatu*, Kraków 2012.

Whitfield B., *Victim to Survivor, then Thriver: Carole's Story – Hope for Survivors of Childhood Trauma, Abuse or Neglect*, Pennington 2011.

Zabin A., *Rozmowy z pedofilem*, Poznań 2021.

<https://www.aufarbeitungskommission.de/> (09.01.2022).

(translation: Katarzyna Górską-Łazarz)